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# *LADY CHATTERLEY'S LOVER*: FROM SCRIPT TO CINEMA: GAINS AND LOSSES

**CYRINE KORTAS,**
**A DOCTORAL STUDENT**
**FACULTY OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES,**
**ENGLISH DEPARTMENT**
**SOUSSE, TUNISIA,**

**ABSTRACT**

*While becoming widely popular with a growing reading public, Lady Chatterley's Lover, by D. H. Lawrence, has become even more popular and inspirational for a film public. Its controversy, mainly the claim that it is a threat to morality because of its preaching of physicality, has attracted critic interest, readers, and movie makers. The inspirational quality of the novel lies in its deep treatment of the issue of searching for a true meaning of the self, a meaning that combines the body and mind. Because it is a novel filled with body imagery, it invites and answers the need for visualization, a common ground with films as both of modern novels and films share a common interest in deciphering and voicing the inner workings of mankind. Hence, a cinematic adaptation of the novel will focus more adequately on deciphering these mental images and voicing the desires lying behind them. Cinematic adaptation is about adapting literary works to cinema. Such exercise found roots in the existing similarities between these two artistic genres. According to Alan Spiegel, "the common body of thought and feeling that unites film form" lies in sharing what he calls "a concretized form," a form that is dependent on generating mental imagery (xiii).*

**Keywords**: Lady Chatterley's Lover, inspirational, Cinematic adaptation

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# *LADY CHATTERLEY'S LOVER*: FROM SCRIPT TO CINEMA: GAINS AND LOSSES

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While becoming widely popular with a growing reading public, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, by D. H. Lawrence, has become even more popular and inspirational for a film public. Its controversy, mainly the claim that it is a threat to morality because of its preaching of physicality, has attracted critic interest, readers, and movie makers. The inspirational quality of the novel lies in its deep treatment of the issue of searching for a true meaning of the self, a meaning that combines the body and mind. Because it is a novel filled with body imagery, it invites and answers the need for visualization, a common ground with films as both of modern novels and films share a common interest in deciphering and voicing the inner workings of mankind. Hence, a cinematic adaptation of the novel will focus more adequately on deciphering these mental images and voicing the desires lying behind them.

Cinematic adaptation is about adapting literary works to cinema. Such exercise found roots in the existing similarities between these two artistic genres. According to Alan Spiegel, "the common body of thought and feeling that unites film form" lies in sharing what he calls "a concretized form," a form that is dependent on generating mental imagery(xiii). Cinema benefited from the huge development that the English novel underwent by the end of the nineteenth century as it grew out of the tradition of telling into that of showing. The showing technique reduced the authorial voice in order to permit the reader to mentally visualize and live the work. Actually, modern English novel and films share an interest in visual art, meeting as such on a common ground which is that of intensifying "the integrity of the seen object and give it palpable presence apart from the presence of the observer" (Spiegel 63). The newly acquired interest in depicting objects is often exhibited as a vivid tie binding both cinema and modern English novels. It is what made Dewitt Bodeen, co-author of the screen play for Peter Ustinov's *Billy Budd*, claim that "adapting literary works to films is, without a doubt, a creative understanding" (349). Actually, films prove to be a laborious, visual translation of the novels they are adapting as

they pay tremendous attention and focus on seen objects that precipitate the dramatic unfold of the story's events. A film aims not simply at showing objects, but also at telling the story by telling "things that could be conveyed also in the language of words" (Metz 12).

When attempting at retelling the original story, the question of fidelity arises. A cinematic adaptation, no matter how skillful it is, must be already and always assessed in its ability to fathom and match the very essence of the literary work and explore what lays beneath the lines, hence the legitimacy of asking how much of the story is retained. To answer these questions we have to be aware not simply of the possibility of film adaptation but also of the urge of adaptation. The following study aims at giving insight into the cinematic adaptation of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, a novel banned during the early twentieth century because of its erotic scenes; yet, lured many a film maker in the second half of the twentieth century.

Interestingly, the novel was adapted to movies three times after its legal publication in Britain in the 1960s. Though I will be hinting at the three adaptations (1981, 1990, 1993), I will be focusing most importantly on the 1993 movie by Ken Russell as it is more in tune with the third version of the novel unlike the first two adaptations. It is an attempt at retelling the story of Lady Chatterley as truly and adequately as possible to the original text.*Lady Chatterley's Lover* is one of the many cinematic interests into the works and life of one of the most intriguing writers of modern English literature D.H. Lawrence. The latter proved to be an inspirational source to international cinema public. Actually, "ten feature-length films based on the life and works of D. H. Lawrence were released over the second half of the twentieth century" (Greiff xiii).

As mentioned earlier, the cinematic interest in Lawrence's works can be explained by the fact that they are gauged with imagery that invite film adaptation. *Lady Chatterley*, for instance, attracted many film makers because of its elaborate mental imagery. Additionally, both the novel's seemingly linear narrative structure as well as its thematic interest attracted movie makers and viewers. Actually, the novel traces the development of Connie Chatterley into a truly-loving woman. The protagonist endlessly pursues love to finally find it in the least likely of places, in a cabinet in the heart of Wargby's wood, owned by Count Clifford's gamekeeper. Oliver Mellors initiates Connie into the world of desire and passion, a world she could not access when being the lady of Wargby. She has not simply to give up on her social status that of being a lady, but also on her soulless commitment to her husband Clifford. She flees a world of pretense, smothering mechanization, and rigid intellectualism. It is a world where tradition and norms get over true emotion that she only

finds in the forest to discover her self, life, and love anew. Hence, to study both of the novel and film version, one has to focus on the daunting issue of Connie's coming to age as a true woman, a woman in tune with her desires and passions. Consequently, the aim of the following paper is to study the cinematic adaptation of *Lady Chatterley* by focusing on Ken Russell's 1993 adaptation to the BBC, and assess the fidelity of the movie maker to the original text.

The cinema's fascination with Lawrence is met with similar interest from the author himself. Many a time, he wrote about films and cinema theatres in poems such as "When I Went to the Film," and "Let Us Be Men". They also have their share in novels such as in the text under study:

> The car ploughed uphill through the long squalid struggle of Tevershall the blackened brick dwelling, the black slate roofs glistening their sharp edges, the mud black with coal-dust, the pavements wet and black. It was as if dismalness has soaked through and through everything. The utter nega tion of the gladness of life, the utter absence of the instinct for sharply beauty which very bird and beast has, the utter death of the human intuitive faculty was appalling. The stacks of soap in the grocers' shops, the rhubarb and lemons in the greengrocers', the awful hats in the milliners', all went by ugly, ugly, ugly, followed by the plaster-and-gilt horror of the cinema with its wet picture-announcements, "A Woman's Love!" ( *Lady Chatterley's* 25)

Evoking cinema is surrounded by a gloomy mood caused by the negative effects of industrialization on man's life. Yet, it seems to explore the main concern of the novel: a woman in love. The vague and unclear atmosphere surrounding the scene did not prevent Lawrence from rendering this scene one of the most important and determining ones in the novel. Lawrence's attitude towards cinema,characterized by haziness and ambiguity, did not prevent both himself and movie-makers from presenting a highly visual art that was filmed three times in less than twenty years. "Among his peers, the great figures of early modern fiction, [Lawrence] was possibly the most sensitive to the potentialities of image and scene" (Greiff 2). In the novel, the image is made vivid through words, while in film through pictures and scenes that further bring Connie's love to life. Hence, the challenge

faced by the movie -maker lies in capturing the very essence of the novel and translating it into evoking pictures and gestures.

Despite the harsh criticism leveled against Russell's 1993 adaptation, the latter is still open to discussion and debate because of its powerfully exaggerated artistic treatment of certain scenes. Exaggeration proves to be a cinematic technique that serves thematic concerns developed in the novel. One of these exaggerated scenes is the one showing Sir Clifford being propelled by his coal cart, fully military dressed, trying to intimidate the colliers going on a strike. To visualize such a scene and capture the inner working of the character, Russell had to dig deeper into the novel and go beyond the limits of words to reach both character and author' intentions and render them visible for the cinema audience byintensifying Clifford's handicap that proves to be not simply physical but most importantly emotional. His inability to understand the demands of the colliers stems from his emotional rigidity that blurs his fathoming of the world and its people, most importantly his wife. Though Russell's exaggeration was condemned and acclaimed inartistic (Greiff 13), I believe it added to the general understanding of both character and novel. The amplified depiction of the coal collier by the end of the WWI is meant to highlight the devastating effect of the war on Britain specifically, epitomized in the character of Clifford who lost not simply motion but most importantly humanity as he became imprisoned by his wheel chair. He stands for a generation of Britons that surrendered to modernization and mechanization at the exception of love and passion. In both novel and film, Clifford is portrayed as the emblem of a lost generation to the demands of mind and materiality.

Clifford is soon to be contrasted in the novel by one of his friends Tommy Ducks who believes that the salvation of mankind lies in "the resurrection of the body" (*Lady Chatterley's* 12). Ducks' claims find echo in the character of Oliver Mellors, the gamekeeper whom Russell chooses to delay his appearance, creating therefore suspense. It is with the mysteriously Byronic-like Mellors that Lawrence chooses to convey his prophecy to both mankind and Connie as she will be initiated into a world of love and passion. To establish the tacit contrast between a world of frigid sexuality and that of passion, Russell elaborated in his cinematic adaptation of the novel the dressing code of the characters especially that of Connie who transforms from a ghost-like existence wrapped in blackness to a true loving and cheerful woman. The awakening of Connie takes place after meeting the half-naked Mellors for the first time cutting woods. The scene of sweating shirtless masculine body arouses and awakens Connie to a new reality, that of the body. As soon as she returns home, she stands naked in front of the mirror to meet for the first time with her femininity

that was chained in the world of absurd intellect and mundaneness. As readers, we try to keep Lawrence's description of Connie's naked body at the beginning of the seventh chapter along of the coming six sex scenes that trace Connie's rebirth. Interestingly, the scene in the movie seems to stick in one's mind as the struggle for visualization vanishes with the cinematic adaptation. In the following paragraphs, I will be focusing on the way the camera eye captures the essence of these critical yet determining scenes that transmit the Laurentian theme and prophecy. Though they are classical scenes of love and passion, they seem very difficult to film as they should transcend shallow eroticism and avoid pornographic interpretations. As a matter of fact, the troublesome nature of the love scenes in the novel lies in the complexity of understanding and visualizing these episodes which are surrounded by mystery and obscurity, which further intensify the movie maker's interest in the novel. Both mystery and gloominess add to the graphic nature of the work, which explains the cinematic technique adopted by Russell, who "keeps his camera focused and running only when the lovemaking between Connie and Mellors seems troubled. On the other hand, when their sexual encounter [approaches] fulfillment, Russell turns away his camera away …" (Greiff 146). The following cinematic technique asserts that Russell's treatment of the theme of love via filming the sex scenes is in tune with Lawrence's perception of love, undoing any pornographic claim associated with such adaptation. It is therefore an attempt to grasp Lawrence's idea of sexuality which turns to be a religion of its own that cannot be reached unless lovers go through thorny and tiring paths of self-discovery. What truly matters is not the sexual fulfillment but the struggles that lead to it. It is this very trickiness that renders "*Lady Chatterley's Lover* still resist[s] filming, the reason for its elusiveness may be found among these very options of cinematic sexuality" (Greiff 147).

Resisting filming, i.e, raising difficulties and challenges for movie makers, can be explained by the complexity of the text and the agenda of the author. As far as the author is concerned, the work treats a domestic love-story that transcends the limits of class and customs. It explores a Laurentian desire for true love and passion as the marrow of life that he misses in his own world. As far as the text is concerned, the complexity lies at the level of characters. Different directors interpreted characters differently. Some of the characters were overshadowed, while others were highlighted depending on their importance for the directors. "Because of Jackin's distance from Lawrence's final version," for instance, "it is not surprising that so many pivotal characters from *Lady Chatterley's Lover* disappear-Tommy Dukes and the cronies, Michaelis, the Venetian gondoliers, Giovanni and Daniele," (Greiff 155) disappear from the 1981 interpretation. Deleting similar characters can be

explained by the director's own disinterest in presenting them, or it may hint to a lack of a thorough knowledge of both writer and novel. The question to be raised at this level is can a similar technique mar the experience of adapting a novel to films? Does the novel eventually suffer when overlooking some its components? To answer these questions, Ronald Barthes' differentiation between narrative functions seems to be adequate.

Ronald Barthes defines a narrative function as "the seed that it sews in the narrative, planting an element that will come to fruition later … either on the same level or elsewhere, on the other hand" (89). He carries on explaining that: "A narrative is never made up of anything other than functions in differing degrees, everything it signifies" (89). In this scope, he distinguishes between two main narrative functions: distributional and integrational. While the former refers to actions and events and they are horizontal by nature, the latter refers to a "more or less diffuse concept which is nevertheless necessary to the meaning of the story" (Barthes 92). The indices, as called by Barthes, denote characters' portraits as well as the setting. The following distinction between story and discourse, we can use the story elements in a narrative and transmit them to the cinema as both arts tell a story colored by different characters as well as settings. It depends therefore on the directors' understanding of these functions.

In some other adaptations, directors interpret major characters differently, most importantly depending on gender orientation. In Jackin's 1981's interpretation, for instance, "Connie is reduced to purely physical and sensual proportions" (Greiff 156). On the other hand, "Jackin's Sir Clifford, as played by Shane Briant, proves more compelling than his wife, partly because he is in flux, evolving throughout the film unlike any of its other major figures" (Greiff 156). Interestingly, the final scene of Sir Clifford contradicts Jackin's understanding of a crying Clifford, childishly holding tight to Mrs Bolton's apron, can in no way prove to be an evolving character. He is rather presented as an oedipal character with a fixation on female characters. Jackin's masculine interpretation of both Sir Clifford and Connie falls short of the authorial intention of both characters as Clifford is meant to epitomize the monstrosity of man-made modernization, conveyed through his inseparable position from his wheelchair, Connie is presented as a woman coming to age in search for herself through her search for love and passion. In the novel, it is Connie that is meant to earn and arouse thesympathy of both writer and reader, and not Clifford as filmed by Jackin. It is the character of Mellors that gains directors' interest and remains faithful to Lawrence's literary intentions as the catalyst of Connie's awakening and transformation. Being the emblem of the natural world conveyed through the wood of Wargby, Mellors introduces Connie into a world of lyrical images of passion enlivened by forest-like

melodies that turn the heart and move the soul. It is these very converging scenes of love, passion, and life that turn the novel intriguing. The desire to unveil these intricacies lies in the full grasp of the character of Mellors when replacing words and mental images into filmed images, images that capture the earthly cardinality of D.H. Lawrence. It explains as such the tendency of "Russell's actor to exaggerate his behavior toward aggression and threat" (Greiff 159). This aggressiveness is materialized in their first love scene:

> And then began against the unspeakable motion that was not really motion, but pure deepening whirlpool of sensation, swirling deeper and deeper through all her tissue and consciousness, till she was perfect concentric fluid of feeling, till she lay there crying in uncon-
> -scious, inarticulate cries, the voice out of the uttermost night, the life, exclamation. And the man heard it beneath him with a kind of awe, as his life sprang out into her. And as it subsided he subsi-
> -ded too, and lay utterly still, unknowing, while her grip on him Slowly relaxed, and she lay inert. (133-34)

The destructive power of the first love-making scene transmits a generation of frustration and agonizing Puritanism that deeply contrasts with the awakened sensuality experienced by Connie not only in the forest but also in Venice, the city of love. It is this contrast that was highlighted when filming the violently apocalyptic scene of love-making and the exaggeration of Sean Bean when playing the role of Mellors. The technique of exaggeration proves to be an adequate tool to grasp and translate the powerfully psychological dilemmas underwent by the characters. Furthermore, the destructive and aggressive nature of these scenes is needed for the sake of accentuating the aura of mystery associated with Laurentian love. It is something that movie makers such as Russell acknowledge as "no representation of sex is viewed from the outside camera approximate it no matter how rugged or beautiful the bodies may be" (Greiff 161). The mystery is further evoked with the final scene with the sailing Mellors awaiting for divorce in order to be reunited with Connie and their unborn child. Russell, unlike other movie makers, seems to fully grasp Lawrence's ideas when positively interpreting and filming this particular scene. Though the novel seems to end with a sad note of separation and wait, Russell's film closes up with an optimistic smile that foreshadows a coming reunion. Hence, both Connie and Mellors are

promised a prosperous future and the film a classical closure of a romance. The 1993 film seems to give the novel a possible end, an end that Lawrence did not write; yet, he might intend. It is in similar cases that we notice the compatibility between novels and movies as they seem to complete one another, which further asserts that they are twin arts.

Because the novel is a romance, most film interpreters highlighted the following aspect at the exception of other elements making the narrative texture. Nevertheless, this aspect proves to be challenging in the sense that the theme of love compels movie-makers to create the same sensation evoked in the literary work:

> Then, as he began to move,. . ., there awake in her new strange thrills, rippling, inside her. Rippling, rippling, rippling, like a flopping over lopping of soft flames, soft as feathers, running to points of brilliant, exquisite, exquisite and melting them all motion inside. It was like bells dippling up and up to a culmination. (157)

These scenes are also compelling for actors as they have to live the same sexual experience lived by the characters, especially for the actress playing Connie as she was pregnant when shooting.Additionally, the mythical dimension of the characters was overlooked by the cinematic adaptation of the novel. In the magical setting of the forest of Wargby as place of rebirth, characters such as Connie and Mellors are endowed with mythical grandeur, referred to by Lawrence as "dark gods" (*A Propos* 2). Early in the novel, Connie is depicted as growing desperate and dissatisfied with the predicament of leading a soulless, cold life with Clifford. In the image of nature's goddess Persephone[1], Connie comes to life when love sparks with Mellors. The celebration is evoked in the naked dancing scene. Though Russell is touched by "the spirit of the wood" (*Lady Chatterley* 20), he could not represent the mythical dimension of both characters and scene. Movie-makers were unable to reproduce the phallus as the "only great old symbol of godly vitality in man, and of immediate contact" (*A Propos*328). It is this godly feature that remains unattained and brings the work to a superficial treatment of the theme of love as a cosmic power to heal the calamities of industry.

[1] Persephone is Demeter's daughter and Hecate's wife. She was brought to the underworld to rule over it with Hecate. Seeing the pain and agony of Demeter after losing her daughter and her anger that destroyed the earth, Zeus allowed Persephone to go up to the surface to ease Demeter's pain, which announces spring. Persephone is therefore the goddess of spring (Donavan 3-4)

Among the other challenges is a full understanding of the novel as it is not simply about love; it proves to be more complex than a mere romance. The novel is a social work that addresses the issue of class in a rigid British society at the turn of the century. Lady Chatterley is a woman from the noble, upper class who falls in love with her husband's gamekeeper. Loving a commoner was considered a shameful act and treason to her class, refuted by all social norms. Connie is therefore the true protagonist in the novel as she refused to be condemned by this social rigidity that renders her a soulless body that haunts the castle of Wargby waiting for a sweeping change in her life. The novel is therefore a criticism leveled against social norms that further widen the gap between classes. Unfortunately, this aspect is not sufficiently sensed in Russell's interpretation of the character of Mellors, the true representative of this class. Featured by Sean Bean, Mellors is filmed almost as a young refined gentleman with his neat and proper clothes and gestures. With the exception of the scene of striking colliers, Russell's movie does not seem to pay enough attention to the issue of class as it focuses primarily and most importantly on the issue of love.

Film adaptation to canonical works of literature has grown into an artistic tradition since the eve of the twentieth century. Benefiting from the similarity in their narrative modes, cinema explores the world of literature as it gauges with well-developed and structured stories. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is one of many movies that lured cinematic adaptation. Yet, these adaptations are to be judged as far as the issue of fidelity is concerned as it permits to assess the gains and losses the novel undergoes. It is from this particular angle that the paper aimed at studying the different cinematic adaptation of the work. It is true that similar adaptations brought the work to a wide mass of audience and simplified some complexities; however, it overlooked some important aspects, mainly the mythical and social dimensions of the novel, and reduced it to a sheer love story.

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